

To Be A Crossroads: Gender, Sexuality and Deaf Culture

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In a world in which cultural and personal values and norms change rapidly, the process through which one develops a self-identity is an increasingly complex task, especially when one identifies strongly with numerous cultural groups.¹ This paper specifically examines the multi-layered identities of Deaf Lesbians oppressed on the basis of disabilities, homosexuality, and gender. In this paper I shall also show that we could better understand the process of identity-formation if we were to consider the ways in which the categories of Deaf and Lesbian/Gay intersect.

Members of Deaf culture, and members of Lesbian cultures, each face issues that are particular to their respective cultural group. For example, lesbians must cope with discrimination directed at them on the basis of their sexuality; meanwhile, Deaf people may face discrimination directed at them because of perceived disability. In order to gain access to the rights, Deaf people have demanded recognition of communication barriers and have sought support for their efforts to overcome inequality through the American Disabilities Act (ADA). For example, news channels on television previously have not been close-captioned. Without such options, viewers are limited in accessing information and must read newspapers instead. Gay activists also seek equality by lobbying governments and working to destroy mainstream cultural norms. Thus, individuals into either Deaf culture or Gay culture have formulated a part or all of their identity with one culture.² However, individuals who are situated in both cultures present a unique caveat to the understanding of multi-layered identity insofar as Deaf culture and Gay culture arose independently of one another. Deaf-Gay culture has arisen out of the same cultural politics that give birth to the two movements. There are significant parallels between the Deaf and gay cultures, the most striking of which is based on how identity is formed.

I shall first look at the multiple factors that women with disabilities in general face in creating a positive self-identity. Many Deaf activists argue that disability is irrelevant to a discussion of Deafness and identity because deafness is not a disability; on the contrary, it is a distinct cultural way of life (ergo the capital "D"). In this paper, I shall consider this debate as it pertains to a better understanding of the multiplicity of self-identity. For the purposes of this paper, the research on disabled women provides helpful data to compare with Deaf women's experiences.

I shall also focus upon Deaf culture itself: what processes help to create a Deaf identity for individuals? Is there an effect of false homogeneity (the idea that all individuals with distinguishing characteristics are all alike; the result of superimposing stereotypical images over every individual who seems to fall into a category)? Moreover, I shall look at parallels and contrasts in the Lesbian/Gay culture. Finally, I shall also explore the rise of the Deaf Gay and Lesbian culture.

A consideration of the culture/disability debate is important before I present an analysis of issues that women with disabilities face so that we may have a better under-

standing of how the term "disability" functions on cultural and political levels. The capital "D" in "Deaf" is employed in order to resist the imposition of a stereotype that views deafness as a "lack." By utilizing the term "deafness," Deaf people have established the so-called disability as a cultural trait. To the objection that deafness is not a disability, I would respond in several ways. First, deafness as a cultural category has only recently begun to be recognized by the hearing community as the capital "D," Deaf cultural group and not simply as a disability. Hence the term "deaf" now serves two functions: as a cultural description and as a physical one. The dual functions of the category of Deaf enables Deaf people to benefit from the ADA (American Disabilities Act) as well as enabling the formulation and sharing among Deaf people as a kind of cultural solidarity that lends support and helps to create a sense of identity among individuals.

Women with disabilities must cope with various factors that affect their identities. On one level, they must face the popular image of and behavior towards disabled people. They are often shunned, are absent from mainstream society, left out of the aesthetic ideal that patriarchal culture has created (the ideal being one in which "normal" bodies are not "deformed," and are "flawless," and "beautiful" to a point of such perfection that women who meet this ideal are trapped on a pedestal (Phillips, in Fine and Asch, 1988, p. 307). Those who do not do so are likewise trapped, not at the top, but at the bottom), and are often subject to the commonly imposed image of an eternal and dependent childhood (Blackwell-Stratton in Fine and Asch, p. 307). For example, one disabled woman narrates an episode that occurred in the supermarket: she and her husband were shopping. The non-disabled husband was pushing his wife's wheelchair through the store aisles as an able-bodied woman approached them, saying to the husband, "Oh, you must be a saint." Did they think it was easy for the wife to live with him? (Fine and Asch, p. 18).³

Resistance to this popular image of disability as a "lack" was a major impetus to the birth of "disability culture." The false homogeneity which was imposed upon disabled people as a group by, for instance, stereotypes and popular ideology propelled a positive formulation of disabled identity; that is, a sense of belonging arose amongst persons with disabilities, one which was derived from the shared values and experiences, and from being a member of a speech community inside of which words like "crips" and "deaf kid" were reclaimed.

Women with disabilities must deal with issues related to the intersection of gender and of disability. Like all women, women with disabilities must cope with the double standard of gender bias in the job market, in accessing medical treatment, and educational opportunities. Although all women in the United States continue to face these difficulties, disabled women face them to an even greater degree than non-disabled women because they diverge from an able-bodied aesthetic ideal.

Further, historically, disabled women have been "severed from the sisterhood in an effort to advance more powerful, competent and appealing female icons" (ibid, p. 4). Feminist perpetuation of a so-called able-bodied aesthetic has been roundly critiqued by the disability movement and some progress has been made to address this critique. Not only did disabled women lack access to a woman-centered discourse, they had to assert themselves against the image of the cute, but helpless, poster child (Blackwell-Stratton, in Fine and Asch, p. 307) in contrast to the model beauty queen (though this has been complexified

with the recent naming of Heather Whitestone, a hearing-impaired woman, as Miss America). In the eyes of society, the helpless poster child will remain forever childlike, dependent, without female adult roles such as mothers, wives or workers. Without role models who have successfully negotiated any of these roles, the disabled woman has "[lived] as a kind of social nomad. There is no place in society she can call her own" (ibid, p 301).

At this point, it is clear that disabled people as a group have resisted the imposition of popular image (in which their images were of a "lack" or of a negative). Disabled women likewise have resisted the same stereotyping that has created a false sense of homogeneity. Like non-disabled women in the feminist movement, disabled women began their own consciousness-raising efforts and to explicitly create a history of their own identity politics.

Can the Deaf woman fit into the self-ascribed identity category created by women with disabilities? In Deaf culture's terms, she cannot. The Deaf woman is able to subscribe to Deaf culture rather than to disability culture, as a distinct result of the ambiguous issues surrounding deafness (the audiological condition) as a disability or cultural trait. Because of this, the Deaf woman is able to set her own standard, apart from that of the disabled woman even though there are many similarities between the two. Like the process described previously for disabled women, Deaf women have resisted a socially generated image of eternal and child-like dependence on the twin levels of disability and gender. But because the legitimacy of her disability as a disability or as a cultural trait is questioned, the result of her resistance to popular image is different from the result that emerged from the disabled women's resistance. To better understand the Deaf woman's position, I will first explore Deaf culture as a whole.

Carol Padden and Tom Humphries demonstrate beautifully the solid presence of Deaf culture in their joint work, *Deaf in America*. In this work, they narrate the stories of several Deaf children as they become aware of their deafness (the audiological condition):

There are recurrent themes that underlie their stories, a foundation of meaning that does not exist by coincidence, nor by the presence of a common physical condition. What unites their cases is the fact that each has gained access to a certain cultural history, the culture of Deaf people in America (Padden and Humphries, 1988, p. 25).

The presence of recurrent themes is, of course, an example of a shared trait, a sense of "sameness" that enables individuals to be able to subscribe to a culture. Like many other cultures, Deaf culture is also partially a politically engendered resistance to social constructions of deafness as a "lack." In this construct, deaf people are regarded as needing to speak; as a result of this belief system, the oral method of teaching the Deaf to speak without the aid of signing arose (one in which physical punishment was used as reinforcement). Oralism is a school of thought that believes Deaf people can learn to speak and to function in mainstream society as "normal" persons. This perception is a difficult one to explain.

In 1880, Alexander Graham Bell (who invented the telephone by first trying to invent a hearing aid) poured money into the oralist cause at the International Conference of the Educators of the Deaf. At this conference, the Deaf teachers' vote to continue teaching sign

language was denied. Participants were shocked that Bell supported oralism, considering that he had a Deaf mother and Deaf wife who could speak as well as sign. Why did Bell make the stand for oralism? Perhaps, he, like other people in history, needed a way to control his own fears of differentness (or perhaps he wanted to make sure his invention of the hearing aid sold well). In reaction to the oppressive oral method, a kind of Deaf solidarity was created.

Ways of living proposed for the Deaf people that ignore their past, that attempt to remove, either directly or indirectly, their historically created solutions, are not possible lives [especially when considering that] the biological characteristic of not hearing is intimately bound up with Deaf people's culture and language (ibid, pp. 120 and 110).

Along with the attempt to re-make Deaf people in order to enable them to be more like the "normal hearing," there was an effort to create a sense of false homogeneity among all Deaf peoples. Little attention was paid to the fact that there are varying degrees of deafness; this in itself is recognized by Deaf culture - in fact, the degree and type of deafness forms a certain type of ethnicity within Deaf culture. In much the same way that American citizens are all Americans but also retain their cultural heritages (i.e., African-American, Latin-American), Deaf people participate in their own unique ways in Deaf culture. Leo Jacobs, in *A Deaf Adult Speaks Out*, identifies nine categories of deaf people: the average deaf adult, low-verbal deaf adults, uneducated deaf-adults, products of oral programs, products of public schools, deafened adults, and hard-of-hearing adults. Jacob's effort is one of many to resist the stereotypical creation of a homogenous group of deaf people by those in the mainstream U.S. culture.

With the ability to create an identity that is self-ascribed, the Deaf woman, like the disabled woman, has done so under the twin influence of her gender and of her deafness. I would argue that women who are lesbian self-ascribe to an identity that is similarly created by twin factors of solidarity against oppression, on the one hand, and creativity, on the other (by creativity I mean that the self-expression of Deaf women and of Lesbians is constricted by the cultural mores of other cultures). In order to draw the final parallel between Deaf and Gay cultures, it is necessary to look at Gay culture with a view to issues of identity.

Kath Weston in *Families We Choose* adroitly expresses a concern facing many gay men and lesbians: in the process of coming out, do gay men and lesbians have reasons to fear a loss of the cultural heritage and identity that helped to create who they are? As she indicates, more research on the "relative incidence of acceptance and rejection in various groups" is needed (Weston, 1991, p. 60). What Weston's work does so remarkably is to clarify that exact form of resistance that gay men and lesbians have enacted against a mainstream culture that imposed on them a popularly constructed image of sameness. She does this by exploring coming-out narratives as a unifying theme among gay and lesbian individuals: "the emergence of coming out to others as a historical practice and possibilities ensured that lesbian- and gay-identified people of all colors and classes would occupy a common cultural ground" (ibid, p. 61). It must be admitted that she states this in the context of exploring these narratives in terms of what occurred between the individual and the

family as the individual came out to them, thus questioning the "solidarity customarily associated with blood relations" (loc. cit.). However, her search for a unifying ground runs in opposition to the construed belief that all gay men and lesbians are the same and demonstrates instead the cultural diversity among the gay community. With these narratives, Weston also demonstrates that gay identity has long since been regarded as "a species difference" (ibid, p. 203). To do so is, of course, to regard homosexuals as separate and different from heterosexuals yet while "all alike."

Common to Deaf culture, to Gay and Lesbian culture, and to disability culture is a complex fabric of interwoven threads: the resistance to the effect of false homogeneity, a shared language, shared values - and one frequently overlooked characteristic, the idea of inherent quality. For instance, some Deaf people are a part of Deaf culture because they are deaf: "the biological characteristic of not hearing is intimately bound up with Deaf people's culture and language" (Padden and Humphries, p. 110). Similarly, some gay men and Lesbians argue that their sexuality is not a lifestyle choice, but rather an intrinsic quality of their beings. Weston supports the idea of predisposition in her research findings: "in everyday conversation, the majority of both men and women portrayed their sexual identities as either inborn or a predisposition developed very early in life" (Weston, p. 39). For both Deaf culture and Gay and Lesbian culture, identification with groups is a process that is influenced by their peers. For example, since 92% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents, Deaf children acquire their identity with Deaf culture from their peers rather than from their parents. Lesbians and gay men, too, form identities with their similarly oriented peers (Dolnick, 1993, p. 38). The Deaf Gay and Lesbian community is a unique combination of identities in a cohesive whole that meets the needs of individuals who are accepted on one account but rejected on the other.

Tom Kane makes a remark in his story that speaks well for gay men and lesbians alike:

In my research on deaf gay men, I've asked this question of them: Suppose there are two candidates running for president, the first one for the rights of the handicapped and the second one for gay rights. All said they would much rather vote for the one supporting the rights of the handicapped than for the one for gay rights. Which means, the deaf gay person is more concerned with deaf rights than with gay rights. This is also true of us in the deaf community. We think of ourselves as gay first, then deaf second; but in the hearing world, we think of our deafness first, our gayness second. We switch back and forth depending on where we are (Kane, in Luczak, 1993, pp. 35-36).

In this case, where a deaf gay man's Deafness is not a distinguishing feature, a man's (or a woman's) gay (lesbian) identity is emphasized. Similarly, it would seem that in the hearing world, one's Deafness comes to the forefront of one's identity. It is surmisable that in the gay hearing community, a deaf gay man's Deafness again would come to the forefront of his identity. And in the Deaf-gay community? Is the Deaf gay man no longer experiencing domination of one identity over another, but rather experiences a complete and whole sense of self?

The following quote underscores some of Tom Kane's observations. In an interview, a deaf black gay man makes similar responses regarding the shifting interplay of multiple identities:

Q: Do you see yourself as a black deaf gay man, or a deaf gay man, or just a deaf person? Which one do you see yourself as first?

A: I'd see myself as a black person first, then as a deaf person, and then as a gay person.

Q: Any particular reason why you feel that way?

A: Well, since my skin color is visible, they can identify me as black. Then they find out I'm deaf. As for being gay, it's a sticky situation. I'm not really in the closet, but I just have to use my best judgement to trust people to accept me as a gay person. That is the last thing, yet the main concern of all my identities is my gayness.

Q: You mean to say that above all you are concerned with your gayness?

A: Yes, because I see that I have my own rights as a black person already. Then again I have my own rights as a deaf person [due to the ADA]. As for my rights as a gay person, they are not quite established. ("Pablo" in Luczak, p. 39).⁴

For Deaf gay men or Lesbians, as for anybody, what "sticks out" first is what comes to the front of one's identity, for that moment and place. For this Deaf black gay man, his gay identity comes last because it is not the first or the second thing about him noticed. But it is her primary concern because it is a gay man that he has fewer rights.

It is clear that Deaf culture and Gay culture, though developing independently of one another, grew from the same roots - the same politics of culture. Thus, an emergence of a culture that is a combination of both cultures, the Deaf Gay and Lesbian community, is part of a similar process. As Kane remarked, individuals that are a part of both cultures retain a sense of flexibility as they go back and forth between each culture (a sort of culture-flexibility that might well be prescribed for all cultures). Thus far, I have examined three basic cultures: the Disabled, the Deaf, and the Gay cultures, with the hope of creating an intellectual framework in which to think about Deaf-Gay culture.

I fully acknowledge the fact that in this paper I have oversimplified the categories of Gay and Lesbian, Deaf and disability cultures; for the purposes of brevity and clarity I perceived a need to simplify matters into concepts that could be readily discussed. The issue of identity politics has quite often posed problems. The elements involved in the formation of personal identity are heavily intertwined with social identity; clearly the problems centers around the question of dominance, that is, which cultural identity comes to the forefront of one's cultural identity? For example, a woman who is a Deaf Chicana Lesbian is categorized is several different constructions of identity. The problem that identity politics poses is which cultural element is emphasized, if any? As Tom Kane demonstrated, some individuals switch between different categories, depending on their physical, emotional and social locations. Of course, there are no static prescriptions to the structure of identity - each individual creates her

own personal identity as it is affected by her social identity.

In this paper I have attempted to demonstrate the complexities of identity politics by exploring the issues concerning the Deaf Lesbians' cultural identity framework; these frameworks are those used by disability cultures, Deaf cultures and Gay cultures. With the advent of networking and interaction between Deaf women and Lesbians though the breakdown of societal norms (achieved by each group's resistance), the possibility of an established cultural location comes into existence. This new cultural location provides a place for women who previously have had their right to self-expression, creativity and happiness denied by the constraints of mainstream culture to be free.

Notes

1. Exactly what constitutes a "culture" in this context is admittedly problematic. I attempt to clear up this ambiguity in the following narratives.

2. This is an oversimplification made for purposes of expediency in this work. Clearly Deaf or Gay individuals occupy several cultural niches such as racial, religious, or ethnic associations.

3. In my research I was unable to find similar stories about disabled Lesbians and so had to use this example of a heterosexual disabled woman. Let me take this moment now to encourage disabled Lesbians to write their stories.

4. I am not certain that these questions should be asked of people in order to determine their identities. Need we see one identity coming before another?

References

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